

Behind the Gates: A Feminist Critique of Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Orange County*

A Senior Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Arts

By  
Giovanna Derenzo

<u>Dr. Richard Besel</u> Senior Project Adviser	_____ Signature	_____ Date
<u>Dr. Terrence Winebrenner</u> Department Chair	_____ Signature	_____ Date

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With approximately forty percent of new homes in California behind gates, the peaking popularity in these exclusive enclaves sparks interest to discover what is the mystique hidden behind the gates. Not only do the gates hide the secretive lives of the women behind them, but they also hinder their potential. With the spawn of reality television present every cable network, *The Real Housewives of Orange County* delivers all of the expectations of this genre and more as it delves into the complicated lives of the women behind the gates. In previous years most reality television shows focused on young, freshly graduated students entering the real world, but with the development and success of fictional primetime television shows serving as counterparts, *The Real Housewives of Orange County* aimed to target a new audience. The emergence of popular shows such as *Desperate Housewives* and *The OC* paved the way for *The Real Housewives of Orange County* to have found a spot on television watchers' radars. By combining the components of these established primetime television shows, this series capitalizes on the already verified interests of the nation. The running themes of wealth, love, sexuality, drama and relationships allow for *The Real Housewives of Orange Country* to become competitive with popular programs.

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* is a reality television program on the Bravo network created by Orange County producer Scott Dunlop. Dunlop's initial idea was to create a satirical look at the lives of the wealthy living in affluent gated communities. As a resident of Coto de Caza he intended on calling the series "Behind the Gates" and wanted to show the changes in Coto de Caza from forty to fifty years ago as a barren valley to the suburbanization of the twenty-first century (Eades, 2007). The concept for the show was inspired by his initial impressions of California upon his arrival when he posed the question, "Is California a state or a stage?"(Eades, 2007). The show itself alludes to the ABC scripted show *Desperate Housewives*

as well as the Fox drama *The OC* and is regarded as the real-life counterpart to these shows. The show initially was set primarily in the gated community of Coto de Caza and followed the extravagant lives of four “housewives” residing in Coto mansions, contrasted by one “housewife” recovering from a financially depleting divorce forcing her to live in a townhouse in Ladera Ranch. Due to this foil and the need to downplay the extreme exclusivity, the network removed the intended catch phrase, “There’s a mystique of living behind the gates.” Yet with the success of this series as it has flourished and gained popularity, the fifth season of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* continues to appease the audience in offering a fantasy-filled escape for less than an hour, and upholding the mystique of living behind the gates.

The introduction of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* gained mass appeal throughout the United States. The nationwide interest in the show supports scholarly findings that attribute the perceived reality of television to influencing audience beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Researchers have found that perceived reality plays a crucial role in managing the relationship link between television viewing and individual viewers’ construction of social reality (Hawkins & Pingree, 1980; Shapiro & Lang, 1991). Most studies conducted have focused on fictional television programs, but with the increasing popularity in reality programs the ideas of perceived reality versus reality-based programs must be examined. The theory of cultivation also has served as a basis for communication research “demonstrating interest in what is portrayed as reality and how that may differ from the real environment”(Nabi, Biely, & Morgan, 2003). In the field of mass media communication, the old theory of the “magic window” has been used as it defines the viewers’ belief that television content is an unaltered and accurate representation of actual life (Hawkins, 1977; Potter, 1986). The five components of the “magic window” concept are: factuality; perceived plausibility or representativeness; social

expectations which refer to the extent which television programs are viewed as providing social and environmental images similar to those existing in the real world; instruction or perceived utility which is the extent the information contained in a program is seen as useful by the viewer; and identity defined as a feeling of similarity with the characters on television shows (Hawkins, 1977; Potter, 1986). These five elements help to define the relationship between television and reality, as well as what is presented as reality with what the audience perceives is reality.

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* is relevant to the study of communications because it exemplifies the link between what constitutes reality television and the direct influence on the audience and how they assimilate the world of perceived reality with reality based programs and incorporate similarities or distinctions in their own lives, attitudes, and beliefs. This show serves as an example of how ideas that may be perceived as realistic can genuinely be manufactured, spread, and adopted into societal norms. Particular studies have been conducted that examine the societal norms of a “traditional female life narrative,” allowing for reality television shows to reproduce traditional roles for female audiences who can vicariously relive important moments (Brancato, 2007). This study intends to examine the romanticized and fantasized ideal images of marriage/motherhood that are targeted concepts of perceived reality versus actual reality seen in so-called reality television.

With the show *The Real Housewives of Orange County* having gained success among a genre of a dime a dozen new reality shows, this program becomes significant to popular culture. This program has continued to enhance the different facets of reality television by publicizing the lives of matured, wealthy women as well as showcasing the culture and lifestyle of Orange County. Creator Scott Dunlop has also been able to capitalize on *The Real Housewives* as a franchise with spinoff series that also air on the Bravo Network. The spinoffs include the

documentation of housewives in Atlanta, New Jersey, New York City, Washington, D.C., Beverly Hills, and Miami. *The Real Housewives* series has even gained international popularity with programs in Greece and Israel. Also Orange County, Atlanta, New Jersey, and New York City have all been renewed for multiple seasons. The nationwide phenomena has allowed for the women to pursue their own business ventures, sign record deals/record singles and even appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. In association with BravoTV the housewives have personal blogs, photo galleries and a clothing line inspired by the series available on [bravotv.com](http://bravotv.com). The constant accessibility furthers scholastic thought that it is hard for viewers to differentiate between what is presented as reality and what is real when the women are portrayed as distant on the television screen, but available through different mediated means. The accessibility of these women also becomes pivotal in influencing the average woman or “housewife,” setting unattainable expectations of what is desired of a woman, a wife and a mother. These standards reinforce traditional stereotypical expectations of women, in that they should be at a certain level of physical perfection and still be able to fulfill the obligations considered of a traditional “housewife.” Following the lives of the wealthy also intensifies the distinction among classes and subliminally hints to citizens nationwide that this is the average standard of living.

After researching the existing preconceptions of reality television and the portrayal of women in this genre, it has become apparent that the creators of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* have found a way of combining traditional ideas from fictional shows and weaving them in with modern, real life situations. In this essay I aim to discuss the conception of reality television and how women are stereotyped into traditional roles of “housewives” and expected to fulfill the long-established expectations of women, with a particular emphasis on the Bravo show *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. I am using the first season of the series and comparing

it with the fifth and most recent season to show how the program has evolved over time. By using feminist criticism I will be looking at how the waves of feminism frame the context for this program, as well as analyzing the construction of gender and evaluating the patriarchal structure in terms of careers, money, and control. Most of my research focuses on the reappropriation, or symbolic reversal, of the term “housewife,” and if/how it has been assimilated into popular culture. I will also examine how the individual women use stylistic features such as consciousness raising, risking of self and violating the reality structure. The research question I pose then is, what are the implications of this representation of women and their label as “housewives” both in the world of reality television and in the cultural context of the twenty-first century?

### *Background*

Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Orange County* is a program service of NBC Universal Cable Entertainment, a division of NBC Universal and has been an NBC cable network since December 2002. Bravo was the first television service devoted to film and the performing arts when it was introduced in December 1980. Bravo boasts that they employ six female producers, three of whom are executive producers. Twelve of the seventeen executives of Bravo are females, including the Executive Vice President and General Manager of *Bravo Media*, Frances Berwick. Bravo has a strong following among the young and among gay viewers in the United States, with a concentrated age demographic between of 18-54, according to the Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau in 2008 and is viewed in over 83 million homes nationwide.

The first season of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* premiered March 21, 2006, and was watched by approximately 503,000 ages 18-49 and approximately 440,000 ages 25-54. By the time the first season finale aired viewership increased to nearly 977,000 total viewers

(Dunlop Group, 2006). The first season consisted of eight episodes including the reunion special, each running about 44 minutes.

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* was first introduced in 2006 and has continued to air in 2011 with no signs of stopping anytime soon. The release of this show was amidst the growing interest in reality television and Bravo was able to capitalize on that market. In each of *The Real Housewives* series the producers and writers ultimately dictate the events that unfold on the show. Although the housewives are the main features of the show and their lives directly influence what is taped and seen by the audience, the producers and writers of the show have an overriding power, which allows for them to determine the storyline of the series under the management of Bravo. In the Orange County series, the women are faced with their own personal crises as well as national issues, such as the economy, which dictate how they proceed with their lives. With Bravo's producers and writers behind the show, the agenda is predetermined as they can manipulate the topics the women should discuss in order to maintain audience interest. Bravo also holds the power to cut clips and edit the situations so that way the expected dramatic controversies unfold before the audiences' eyes. These expectations that the studio is trying to appease for are those created by the audience. As with many reality shows, the preliminary episodes and seasons offer a more raw unscripted approach, but in order to meet the demands of the audience, producers and writers become more involved in the programs. Bravo's main audiences are the young, hip, and savvy along with the gay community. Aware of their prominent audience demographic, Bravo highlights aspects of the show that appeal to its' audience. Concentrating on the lavish living full of shopping sprees, fast cars, exotic vacations, a life of leisure and little work, Bravo is aware of their subjects' knowledge and attitudes and



desires to lead these lives. By knowing their core audience Bravo is able to play with the audiences' perceptions of what is real versus what is intended to appear real.

### *The Housewives*

In the first season each episode follows the five Southern Californian women documenting their everyday lives filled with shopping sprees, lavish dinners and parties, tropical vacations; the ideal living of the rich and famous. Each season and spinoff here after follows a similar outline, varying by location and cast, who all seem to fit into one of the five typical character types. I will be concentrating on the first season as well as the most recent season to examine the evolution of the series. The first season introduces the five original "housewives" starring as themselves: Kimberly Bryant, Jo De La Rosa, Vicki Gunvalson, Jeana Keough and Lauri Waring. Kimberly Bryant is the typical stay at home mom, with two children and a Fortune 200 husband. She proclaims herself to be the classic trophy wife with blond hair, a toned figure and breast enlargements. Her priorities include catering to her children, living an organic, clean and fit lifestyle, while maintaining her "wild-side." Jo De La Rosa is the youngest of the cast mates, who worked in title insurance until she met Slade Smiley, who introduced her to the Coto lifestyle. Living with Smiley her monetary needs were met, on the condition that Smiley wanted her to become a conventional stay at home wife and mother. De La Rosa had trouble adjusting into that role while being pressured to take care of Smiley's two sons and rather wanted to pursue a career in music. Vicki Gunvalson is in her second marriage and has two children from her previous marriage. She is the dominant force in her family and often is described as controlling, crazy and a workaholic. Gunvalson has had financial success as an independent insurance agent and enjoys indulging in the finer things. Jeana Keough was a former Playboy Playmate in the eighties and an actress. She currently works as a realtor and is

married to a retired baseball player with three children. She struggles with raising her children as the primary parent and disciplinarian. Lauri Waring is the former model and multiple-divorced single mother now living in the townhouse outside of the Coto gates with her three children. She struggles to adapt to the less extravagant life, and in order to make ends meet she begins to work for Gunvalson's insurance company. Waring also struggles to keep her children in line, as her children have difficulty maintaining responsibilities especially her son who spends time in juvenile detention. These women carved out the characteristics of the "housewives" and each series and spinoff follows suit.

Looking at the fifth and current season, there is now an additional housewife making the total six women. Vicki Gunvalson is the only remaining housewife from the first season and is now accompanied by Tamra Barney, Lynne Curtin, Gretchen Rossi and Alexis Bellino. Tamra Barney claims to be the "hottest housewife" who maintains this while having three kids with her husband as well as a twenty three year old son from her first marriage. Barney is also a real estate agent, but does not work as the main breadwinner; rather her husband is a luxury car salesman. As the economy worsens, she is forced to begin working again, as she contemplates downsizing and cutting back on accustomed luxuries. Lynne Curtin is a stay at home mom for her two teenage daughters who cause her and her husband of eighteen years a great deal of grief. Obsessed with looking and staying young, Curtin publicly gets plastic surgery and shares her daughters' clothes. Curtin and her family also were hit by the declining economy and have had housing troubles, which prompts Curtin to focus on her cuff jewelry line. Gretchen Rossi is unmarried and currently the youngest cast mate. She was engaged to an elderly man who died of acute leukemia and currently is dating Slade Smiley (who in season one dated De La Rosa). Rossi was a real estate agent, but now is concentrating on her singing and makeup line. Alexis

Bellino is a stay at home mother of three young children and in her second marriage. Bellino relies on her two maids so that way she can focus on maintaining her physique. Collectively these women serve as examples of the average Coto de Caza “housewives.”

### *Method*

To examine the portrayal of the “housewife” and the reappropriation of the term “housewife,” I am going to use a feminist criticism approach. The feminist movement has occurred in three waves, the first wave beginning around the mid 1800’s and ending in the 1920’s. The second wave of feminism starts around the 1960’s and is arguably still ongoing, with its’ main concerns surrounding social issues such as women’s liberation. The third wave of feminism started around the 1980’s and is still present today in the twenty-first century. The third wave is concerned with minority issues and the fragmentation of feminism, beginning with focus on equal rights of the sexes, yet growing into demanding equality for all.

Feminist criticism is comprised of two steps. The first step is to analyze the construction of each gender in the artifact, looking at how men and women are depicted in the artifact. The second step is to evaluate the presence of patriarchy in the artifact, deciding if the artifact supports patriarchy, resists patriarchy or does both. Patriarchy refers to social systems in which males predominately hold the power to oppress, exploit, and dominate women (Boynton & Malin, 2005). In a larger sense, patriarchy is the control by men of a disproportionately large share of power. Applying this framework to the gender constructions will provide a better-fit view of feminist criticism.

Looking to past research to further explain the ideas presented by traditional feminist criticism helps extend my research claims focusing on the reappropriation of terms. Concentrating on issues pertinent to the second wave of the feminist movement, concerning

social issues and liberation, Karyln Kohrs Campbell examines the oxymoron that arises from feminist rhetoric. For every progressive stride in women's liberation and representation, there arise conditions that women still must uphold expectations of physical perfection and the assumption of traditional familial roles. Campbell suggests that the rhetoric of the contemporary women's movement is comprised of substantive and stylistic components, which constitute it as a unique genre. Campbell then identifies three distinct stylistic features that characterize feminist criticism. The first term is "consciousness raising," the idea of questioning the status quo and what is considered as normal. With consciousness raising all are allowed to participate as well as all attending share the leadership role. There is no hierarchy or required expertise; the only expertise is that of personal experience and individuals are experts of their own experiences. The goal of consciousness raising is making what is personal become political (Campbell, 2005).

Campbell's second idea is the "risking of self," which is the notion of extending an argument as though the rhetor was extending a part of herself. Campbell recognizes that during feminist rhetoric women offer ideas at the thought of risking themselves and their beliefs (Campbell, 2005). The potential to be denied is not only on a personal level, but can be paralleled on a political field under Campbell's criticism.

The last idea that Campbell offers is the notion to "violate the reality structure." She contends arguments that are not part of the status quo, violating the reality structure of patriarchy, are used to get attention or to bring about awareness. One technique that she offers to address the reality structure is symbolic reversals. Symbolic reversals take negative terms society has applied to women and transform them into positive terms. The power and fear in these terms are exploited as potential sources of strength (Campbell, 2005). These terms are reappropriated by the minority using the term for empowerment.

Housewives in association with feminism have been previously studied and have been maintained as an “uninterrupted cultural currency as a label for white, economically privileged housewives, married to dull, older, rich white men,” yet feminist critics have largely overlooked the study in association with reality television (Helford, 2006). Suggestions that the traditional housewife fits these particular qualifications further indoctrinates women into traditional gender roles. The presentation of a “traditional female life narrative,” as studied by Brancato, allows for reality television shows to reproduce traditional roles for female audiences to vicariously embody (Brancato, 2007). By displaying the traditional and stereotypical role of a housewife, Maher suggests that it can “soothe the pain of the dissimilarity between experience and fantasy by watching another episode that evokes the same romance fantasy and which of course serves to sustain the fantasy” (Maher, 2004). The idea that the lives of housewives are romanticized and fantasized further suggests that the ideal images of marriage/motherhood should be restored to a sort of mythic purity, in that women should return to their traditional role assumed by their gender alone (Maher, 2004). My analysis seeks to identify if the traditional role of a “housewife” is embodied in *The Real Housewives of Orange County* and how the women embrace or neglect this gender assigned role.

In order to examine the gender construction of men and women in the show *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, I will be evaluating their roles based on three overarching themes rooted in work, money, and control because almost every conversation and argument stems from these premises in every season. Not only are these three themes controversial on the show, but also these themes are relevant in the viewers’ lives, which aid in skewing the audience’s perceived sense of reality versus the fantasies captured in the program.

*Analysis**Work, Money, and Control*

In the first season the men are rarely ever featured in the episodes, unless seen on a date with their wives or accompanying them to an important event as with Lauri Waring and her fiancé George, who is never seen unless in these particular situations. The males' absence insinuates that they were always working; yet the amount of work and type of work were never really discussed. The assumption that the men worked parallels the stereotypical notion of the construction of a breadwinning husband responsible for supporting his family. The featured men never discuss money or their earnings, rather the gifts they shower their significant others with show their wealth and insinuates the unconscious aspect of competition to give the next best and more expensive gift. In regards to the issue of control the men are not prominent enough to exert control on the women, but their control is seen in the executive decisions made that overrule the women's decisions to go on vacations or make large purchases. The control that is placed upon the women causes them to seek approval in order to try to attain more freedom. This struggle for freedom is seen with Jo De La Rosa as she attests to her boyfriend's wishes for her to stay home, by complaining that she is lonely and bored all day sitting around the house. The women are largely portrayed as homemakers as their profession with slight glimpses of some of the housewives working or pursuing their own career interests. Kimberly Bryant explains that her family is a normal family, where she stays home and her husband works (Dunlop, 2006). This kind of assumed lifestyle classifies the housewife as an obvious and expected occupational choice. Yet even as some of the housewives attempt to pursue their interests the amount of time they can dedicate to the pursuit is limited by their significant others. Even with a slight insight into their means for making an income, largely the women are seen spending in excess on

purchases much to their husbands' dismay. Money is not an object for these housewives. With no concept of the value of the dollar the women are controlled financially by their significant others, both with restricted allowances and verbal disapproval. There is also a sense of control placed upon the women by their significant others subconsciously that implies that the woman's place is in the home; there is little to no encouragement to pursue outside interests as De La Rosa receives little support from her boyfriend, Slade Smiley, when wanting to pursue her music career. The housewives do not explicitly complain or resist the controlled aspects of their lives because they are not blatantly obvious. Instead the women are seen as focusing on quality family time and planning events and fun parties, always portrayed as staying busy with minutia in comparison to their husbands' duties.

In the fifth and most recent season, even as the characters have changed from the initial season, the construction of stereotypical gender roles still remains as a prominent feature of the show. Although the men are not large features of the show, their presence certainly was more pertinent in this season, especially with the second half of the reunion special being solely focused on the husbands and boyfriends. Even with their supporting role, the men have a significant impact on the plots of the show as they hold a looming effect on the women, intervening in their conversations, one-on-one candid confessions or as imposing on the women's time together, most explicitly seen by Simon Barney, Tamra's husband, as he is always monitoring Tamra. The male gender construction is rooted in the fact that all of the men work, which is in part attributed to the fact that they rarely are featured in the episodes and when they are it is generally in their home offices working or taking a break from work to meet with their wives for quick lunches. Alexis Bellino and her husband Jim make a conscious effort to meet for a midday meal weekly to take a break from both of their days. The stress on the importance of

work was strongly insisted in season five especially as it was filmed simultaneously documenting the economical downfall that has plagued the nation. As this is a reality-based program, it was able to capture the reality of the tough economy and the pressures placed on male familial leaders, especially Lynne Curtin's husband, Frank who was hit hard by slow work in the field of construction. In the show's portrayal of the men, all of them are characterized as working professionals, regardless if their industry was affected by the economy. Characterized as the main breadwinners, the men often cite their limited presence in the women's life as consumed by being able to provide the comfortable lifestyle that the housewives expect. The male figures are depicted as dependent on earning the money as the women are portrayed as spending the money. The men all are responsible for making the executive decisions regarding the handling and spending of money on familial expenses, often without the consent or knowledge of their wives, which lead to trouble in the Curtin's case when the family was evicted from their home without Lynne having any knowledge of financial troubles. The males' money spending tendencies without their wives approval or awareness directly links to the issue of control. The men are often described as controlling of their wives in terms of their actions, time and personal interests. In this regard the men adhere to the traditional husband role as the paternal leader of the family and this is seen explicitly in the show in the tone of voice that the men adopt when talking to the women. By adopting the stereotypical role of the dominant male, the husbands and boyfriends align themselves with playing the part of a father figure as they talk down to their significant others and advise and protect them similar to how a father would. Jim Bellino exemplifies the father figure to his wife Alexis as she constantly turns to him for guidance much like a daughter would ask of her father.

Using the same themes three themes of work, money and control to examine the



construction of the female gender offers contrasting views that the show is able to capture. In comparison to the expectations placed upon the men in the program to work, the women are not held to the same assumptions. Although some of the women have their own businesses, like Vicki Gunvalson, when classifying the women as a whole, their workload pales in comparison to the men's. This coincides with the women's understanding of money as well. They are portrayed as solely spending money without any concern rather than earning any income or with their financial situation. Their concept of money is only discussed when bragging about their designer clothes, the exotic trips they have taken along with the luxury hotels they stayed at, or the newest most expensive car they purchased. The women are also largely not held responsible for making financial decisions or hold any responsibility for their total financial worth as seen in Lynne Curtin's eviction situation. Without any financial responsibilities, the women are shown as lacking control in their monetary means as well as in their lives both inside and outside the home. The housewives are ultimately controlled by their husbands, which leads to the fulfillment of patriarchy.

### *Patriarchy*

The next step of feminist criticism requires the evaluation of patriarchy in the artifact. The definition of patriarchy must be revisited in order to determine the characteristics for the ideological system that is under examination. Patriarchy refers to social systems in which males predominately hold the power to oppress, exploit, and dominate women. By defining patriarchy by these terms each element can be dissected and applied to the artifact. In order to fully understand the evaluation of patriarchy I will examine *The Real Housewives of Orange County* as a series in its entirety using both the first and fifth seasons to explore the ideological system's overriding presence in a reality television based show. The premise of the series is based on

following housewives and their families and with the exploration of gender constructions, the prominent issue of control correlates with the object of male domination. Referencing the gender constructions sheds light on showing a glimmer of resistance to the patriarchal system, as particular characters, Gunvalson, De La Rosa, and Barney, fight the ideological stereotype better than others.

The simple construction of the show reinforces the ideals of patriarchy with the male figures as leaders of the family, and with the women and children financially depending on their earnings. As most of the women do not have full time jobs, or jobs at all, their financial well-beings are dependent on their spouses' success. The male financial dominance then grants them extended control over the women limiting their activities and outside interests. However, the women rely so heavily on their husbands' money that they are accustomed to living the cushioned lifestyle of a housewife predicated on their husbands' control.

They are forced to live their lives following certain guidelines and the best way that they fill their time is by hosting parties and cocktail hours. The constant drinking encourages the idea that the housewives have nothing better to do but to adhere to their husbands' supervision at their households. The housewives contrived happy hours promote gossip, which frames the women as juvenile middle school girls. This characterization places the women as immature and further inferior to the men, as they have nothing intellectual to discuss or offer to the situation. The women are never portrayed as engaging in intellectually stimulating conversations, displaying any sign of intelligence, or even sharing any knowledge of receiving a higher education. The professional careers that the women adopt are not concerned with displaying any intellectual knowledge, from jewelry lines to makeup products to singing careers, the careers themselves demean the potential of the women reaching success. Those few housewives such as Gunvalson,

Keough, Rossi, and Barney, with respectable professions, are pressured to meet expectations that they should still manage the household, care for their children and husbands as their first priority with their work as a secondary concern. The expectation to remain at home to take care of the house and children is promoted by the male figures and eventually causes dissent in some relationships. Barney grows resentful of her husband as he accuses her of not fulfilling her motherly duties and she retorts with the fact that she spends ninety percent of everyday home with the children (Dunlop, 2006).

Instead of encouraging the housewives to pursue their passions and careers, their main job is to maintain their physical appearances. The housewives openly receive Botox treatments and plastic surgery on national television without any hint shame. They are committed to preserving their physical appearance with weekly personal training sessions, spray tan appointments, highlights and teeth whitening. Bellino's introduction says, "Am I high maintenance? Of course I am look at me" (Dunlop, 2006). The pressure to constantly look perfect and "be on" for their husbands is derived from the male expectations of a woman's beauty, causing the housewives and other women to constantly keep reaching for unattainable and unrealistic goals. The show solidifies the insecurities in the women, when the husbands and boyfriends reaffirm the ladies' constant improvements. The spouses' verbal and physical reaffirmations continue the cycle of objectifying women for their physical beauty without encouraging any internal beauty and growth. The growing insecurities are also seen as being adopted by the housewives daughters as they began to implement the same physical regimes as their mothers, even to the extent of supporting eighteen year olds receiving plastic surgery. When both Keough's and Curtin's daughters became of legal age both were allowed to get plastic surgery, Curtin even received a treatment with her daughter. The lacking sense of confidence gives the men the upper hand and

reinforces the system of patriarchy.

The instability between genders is also recognizable in the romantic relationships between the housewives and their husbands. The husbands and boyfriends adopt the father role and are seen and heard speaking down to their wives both in public and private. The number of publicly humiliating moments due to the husbands disregarding their spouse's ideas or thoughts was innumerable, especially in the cases of Tamra and Simon Barney and Jim and Alexis Bellino. The tone of voice adopted by the males is deprecating tone when speaking to their wives and girlfriends in front of other couples, which is noticeably different from a casual tone when speaking with other men. Jim Bellino provides an excuse by attributing his tendencies to his Armenian-Latin background that raised him to be the staunch conservative husband, yet the lack of respect the men show to their significant others is rooted deeper in traditional societal norms (Dunlop, 2006). The lack of respect is also seen in the males' appropriation of blame for any marital problems or problems with the children on the women. Whether disobedient children rebelling or a miscommunication at a dinner, the males place blame for all faults on the women and expect them to handle the situation and to solve the problems. This demand is paired with the housewives' expectations for their husbands to financially take care of them and provide the lifestyle for them that all of the other residents of Coto de Caza have continuing the negative dependent cycle supporting gendered roles

### *The Reappropriation of "Housewife"*

The major focus of my research is to examine the reappropriation, symbolic reversal, of the term "housewife," and if/how it has been assimilated into popular culture through the television program *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. According to Campbell symbolic reversal occurs when the minority group begins to use a word that the majority uses with derogatory

intentions and transforms the word to be used for empowerment purposes (Campbell, 2005). In the context of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, I drew the term “housewife” to study how men, the oppressors, and women, the minority, both utilize the term. First I looked at the traditional and universal definition of the term “housewife” which was defined as “a married woman who manages her own household, especially as her principal occupation” (Merriam Webster, 2010). Looking to identify the traditional, stereotypical description of a housewife, Barbara Ryan found that the traditional gender roles took hold in the postwar years as part of a “mythical ideal American family” (Foust & Bradshaw, 2007). By examining the definition of a housewife, exploring the modern mother, examining their familial relationships, and how the featured characters utilize the term, I hope to get a better understanding of how the term has evolved and been shaped over time.

Studying the term “housewife” sheds light on both how the women featured on the show and society understand and use the term in their vernacular. On the show the women openly and often refer to themselves as housewives as a label for their groups of friends. They associate themselves with the term without acknowledging the true meaning or responsibilities of a housewife. By using it as a label to include the entire group of women they attach the term to any and every event they do as a whole group; Tamra hosts a “Housewives Wiggin’ Out” Bunko party, Gretchen hosts a Tupperware party encouraging all to attend in “old school housewives” attire, their vacations are premised by saying “housewives gone wild,” etc. Rather than using “housewife” in accordance with its’ definition, they use it nonchalantly as a word assimilated into their everyday language, focusing the meaning of the word in place of friend, neighbor, or acquaintance. This may be an advertising ploy encouraged by Bravo to turn “housewife” into a brand name, but regardless the overuse of the term lacks coherence to the actual definition

establishes the women's transformation of the purpose of the word to be used for empowerment.

By definition most of the women do not fit the typical characterization of a housewife, as none of them focus predominantly on taking care of their household as their main occupation. They toy with the definition themselves, struggling to find where they fit within the defining characteristics of the term. When being accused of not working the housewives get offended and claim that being a housewife alone is their occupation, yet when they discuss their daily lives their agendas do not adhere to the traditional definition concerned with the state of their domestic duties. Their agendas are concerned with scheduling gym time with personal trainers, spa days, cocktail hour, dinners, special events to attend, and vacations. The majority of each episode of the show follows the women participating in these activities and rarely are they seen doing work of any sort.

The clashing of what defines a workingwoman becomes a source of conflict between the women, as Vicki Gunvalson identifies herself as the main breadwinner of her family, the only housewife who works, and stresses the importance of her business. Gunvalson develops the tendency, throughout the seasons, to disregard any work that the other women might do because they do not work the long days in an office that she does. She constantly slights the women by not being able to attend workout classes, birthday lunches, or cooking parties because they occur in the middle of the workday, when she is working. The vague idea of what constitutes a housewife increasingly becomes apparent over the course of the seasons. Interestingly in the dictionary there is a supplemental usage note that states, "housewife is offensive to some, perhaps because of an implied contrast with *career woman* (*just a housewife*) and perhaps because it defines an occupation in terms of a woman's relation to a man" (Merriam Webster, 2010). This brings about the idea of a modern mother in the twenty first century who redefines

the traditional notion of a housewife. Contemporary women have left the paid workforce so that they can focus on raising their children, particularly through the children's formative years before entering kindergarten. There is considerable variability within the stay-at-home mother population with regards to their intent to return to the paid workforce. Some women plan to work from their homes, some will do part-time work, some intend to return to part or full-time work when their children have reached school age, and others may find it economically feasible to not return to the paid workforce. There is also a considerable range of difference in what the modern stay-at-home mom's attitude towards domestic work is, with some embracing the traditional role of a housewife cooking and cleaning in addition to caring for children. While others see their primary role as that of child-care providers, supporting their children's physical, intellectual, and emotional development while sharing or outsourcing other aspects of home care. Looking at the suggested attributes of the modern mother in comparison to all of the ladies featured on this television program, they all tend to better fit and represent the contemporary definition of a mother. In season five's reunion special the running conflict was rooted in how to define a working housewife comes to a halt, when Gunvalson concedes to the women when they all share their business ventures and prove that although they do not sit in an office environment everyday, they work from home and part time to meet their financial needs.

Over the seasons of the program, the housewives have largely associated with the progressive ideas of the woman working and managing a home, as some pursued their careers publicly while others prided themselves on staying at home, fulfilling the traditional housewife role. Women like De La Rosa, Gunvalson, Waring, Keough, Varney, Curtin, and Rossi all who at times concentrated on their professional careers were pressured by expectations that they would still manage the household, care for their children and husbands as long as their work did

not interfere with these demands. Waring weighed the responsibilities of being a sole supporter of her family with her main consideration, “I think of what my kids need,” before making any outlandish purchases. Yet considering the miniscule amount of time discussing or showing the housewives working, a contradictory idea arises as even though the women stress their accomplishments as modern career mothers, they ultimately lean towards the traditional role of a housewife according to the definition, in that they enjoy being able to do whatever they want, whenever they want with the money that is expected of their husbands to earn.

Referring back to the definition of a housewife it constitutes the primary concern with the home, which can be broken down into responsibilities as a wife, as a mother and domestically related to housework. On *The Real Housewives of Orange County* each of the women’s families are introduced as minor characters and depending on the situation are featured on film as well. Each housewife’s introduction features her significant other, children or in the case of single housewives, their pets. In the first season of the show, a large focus was placed on the importance of the women spending time with their children and significant others, placing their friendships as conditional to the time spent with the family. Lauri Waring exemplified the importance of family time as she and her fiancé were concerned with blending their two families before their marriage. Vicki Gunvalson is shown going to visit both of her children at college and spending the summer together on a family vacation with the Keough family. Jeana Keough’s one-on-one individual interviews were always focused on what her children were doing or how they cooked dinner together, reiterating the fact that she is able to be friends with her kids as well as play the disciplinary role. All of the ladies’ romantic relationships were protected and played out privately as date nights and participating in similar interests and hobbies shared together did not make airtime.



As season five aired, it became more apparent that the major focus had shifted to the relationships between the housewives as friends and husband and wife conflicts with less emphasis on their familial relationships. In the most current season the children are rarely ever seen in episodes unless briefly at family barbeques or the end of the year party. This may be that the housewives chose for their children to not be filmed to protect their privacy, but the fact that they only occasionally mention family time focused more attention on the romantic relationships of the women. As Gunvalson has been in every season and still stresses the importance of being a mother, her marriage was critically watched as she and her husband struggled to settle differences and salvage their marriage. Along with Gunvalson, Tamra Barney, and Lynne Curtin experienced tumultuous relationship problems that became the talk of the group. The women spent a majority of their airtime discussing each other's relationships, each criticizing another's relationship circulating juvenile gossip.

Looking at the women as mothers brought up conflicts on parental styles. Alexis Bellino has two nannies at all times, while Curtin was criticized for her laid back approach and desire to be her daughters' friend instead of disciplining them. The distortion of emphasis on the family and marriage in season five can ultimately be summed up by Bellino's hierarchy in life: "God comes first in my life, then my marriage, then my children" (Dunlop, 2006). The skewed ordering of not putting family first raised questions especially after she claims that her purpose is to serve and cater to her husband. In respect to assuming domestic household duties, there have been at most five clips of the women cooking, cleaning or paying the bills, etc. Alexis Bellino is always accompanied by two nannies to take care of her young children and her husband has never changed one of their children's diapers. Yet in season five with the worsened economy, Tamra Barney is shown with her entire family cleaning the house on a Sunday, as they had to

fire their maids. The everyday duties expected of the stereotypical mother are never aired on the show, as there is hired help to do the work, taking the responsibilities off of the housewives so that they can engage in other activities.

The luxury they associate with the title of “housewife” is seen as a privilege and hints at their status among all other Coto de Caza women, as if it is their own exclusive group. They use the term to their advantage, to separate themselves from the rest and to brand their lifestyle. This insinuates the notion that being a housewife is a privilege not granted to a majority of the population. The privilege classified primarily by white women, economically well off, married to older workingmen resonates with Helford’s contrived ideal that all of these aspects define and separate these women setting them on a pedestal above the rest. The classification of these women as different and above other modern women refers back to their extensive use of the term in their vernacular. By capitalizing on the term as a housewife, the women have become the face of the housewife of the twenty first century as branded in association with the show. Even at the constant rate that women use the term housewife, the men on show never actually use the word “housewife.” They refer to their spouses as wives, but never housewives although as already stated they do insinuate at the traditional gendered role and responsibility of a housewife minus the actual term. With the women adopting the word housewife into their own vocabulary and using in terms they view as positive, the women featured on the show have succeeded in a symbolic reversal to overturn the outdated, conservative idea of a domesticated stay at home wife and mother with little activity outside of the home. Although the men on the show are not using the term in a derogatory sense, the general connotations associated with the term housewife by the population at large suggests the oppressive nature of the term enforced by patriarchy. Also without saying the actual word “housewife” and simply relying on insinuations

the men still use the term in a deprecating fashion. These ladies have grasped the term and shown that more of their lives revolve around fulfilling their own desires whether inside or outside the home in order to empower themselves. The women are capitalizing on the brand that Bravo has created, taking the term housewife and using it to their advantage to gain popularity, income and pursue their desires. Rossi and De La Rosa both have since pursued careers in music, Rossi also started her own makeup line, Curtin started designing and selling her own line of cuff jewelry, among the many other business ventures the housewives have been able to pursue. The women's empowerment has been grounded in their ability to take advantage of their situation and capitalize on the "housewife" craze and the public's obsession with their lives.

### *Conclusion*

In terms of monitoring the evolution of the term housewife, relevant literature established the role of women to fulfill the "mythical ideal American family" from the postwar era. Since the emergence of women in the work force the term housewife has added career woman to the definition to include mothers and wives who work to support their families. Looking to fit the women of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* into the evolution process, my research has found that they linger between the traditional role and the modern mother ideal, yet there are particular stipulations that hinder these women from clearly identifying with the "housewife" label: some of the women do not own their own homes, are not wives, do not have or take care of their children, or assume domestic household chores. Although the women do not fit an exact mold of a housewife, they have been able to successfully reappropriate the term housewife to use to their advantage. Even as they objectify themselves on national television for an hour every week, the women have been able to distance themselves from the traditional ideals to become the new faces of a glamorous, luxurious lifestyle of a "housewife."

The traditional role of women has been researched by Alison Poe and defines the projection of women in a patriarchal society: [the] woman's place is in the home; women do not make important decisions or do important things; women are dependent on men and are isolated from their own sex; and men regard women as sex objects; they are not interested in women as people (Poe, 185). The women of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* fulfill Poe's beliefs as they adhere to each of these four premises enforced by their husbands. Yet characters like Gunvalson, Barney, De La Rosa, and Waring at times challenged the expected traditional stereotypes placed upon them attached with the label "housewife." These ladies offered a glimpse of resistance to patriarchy, establishing themselves as independent, successful women who just so happened to be featured on a series about housewives. As a whole though the series supports the ideology of patriarchy with emphasis increasing as the seasons progressed especially on the women who challenged the traditional role of a "housewife."

The expectations held by both genders reinforce the theme of male supremacy and reveal that the television series supports patriarchy. Particular characters featured in the series attempt to fight the ideological system offering a glimmer of resistance, yet they are a numbered few. The characters that showed resistance grapple with the tactics mentioned by Campbell; conscious raising, risking of self and violation of the reality structure, yet even as they attempt to utilize these stylistic features they are still restrained by the men. In making an effort to use conscious raising, they draw upon their own experiences to give them leverage against the men, yet those experiences are controlled by the limitations placed upon them by the males and discredited as illegitimate sources. Their expertise is then hindered without them even being aware of it. In regards to the risking of self they too are restricted by their significant others' immediate dismay and eventually stop trying to put themselves out there knowing that they will be overlooked and

discredited, especially in the publicly humiliating situations evoked by Matt Keough and Jim Bellino. From the initial season to the fifth and most recent season, it appears as if the original housewives forewarned the newest cast mates to assume the submissive role and avoid clashing with the previously established gendered roles.

Even as the series is considered a reality television program, the depicted reality is more of a constructed fantasy that most of the nation will never attain, which therefore hampers the housewives from being able to violate the reality structure as their lives are supposed to be picture perfect. The question surfaces, why would they want to challenge the status quo of their pampered, cushioned life regardless if that means other aspects of their lives are limited? The mythical portrayal of an idealized American family does not offer a lot of encouragement for the women to make use of Campbell's techniques, yet even as the women identify themselves as "housewives" they are unaware of the fact that indeed they have adopted one of Campbell's stylistic features.

Examining this show using a feminist criticism lens lends an in-depth look at the lives of these women, whom which most of the nation cannot relate to, yet they are able to reach and influence these viewers through the medium of reality television. What is perceived as real versus what is actually real does not matter when audiences view the show because they are not able to distinguish between the fantasized lives of these women and the fantasies they personally wish to fulfill. The life of a female narrative aids in research conducted by feminists in order to observe how women are able to control a generally objectifying situation and transform it into a source of empowerment, simply by branding the word "housewife." These women of Coto de Caza ignored the public's negative connotations of a label and have been able to alter it to become a pop culture craze and obsession that has been assimilated into the vernacular of the

twenty first century as well as being a solidified catch phrase in television. Regardless of how the women of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* are portrayed, whether as inferior to their husbands, or as independent, or as conceited brats, they erased any and all preconceptions of a housewife and gave it new life, and in doing so have given stay at home mothers and career women a fighting chance or at least an distraction from everyday life to escape to behind the gates of Coto de Caza.

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